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DE RUEHLB #1369/01 1231401  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 031401Z MAY 06  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3322  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001369

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2016

TAGS: [LE](#) [PBTS](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE REACTS TO  
SYRIAN-BUILT EARTHEN BERMS IN THE BIQA VALLEY

REF: BEIRUT 944

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Polchief and econoff met with Rola Nouredine, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister, on May 3 to discuss the widely reported Syrian-built earthen berms in the Biqa' Valley. Nouredine and General Said Eid confirmed the press reports, showing us a video of the berms. They said Syrian border guards had constructed the berms beginning March 20 and ending in early April. The Syrians said the berms, located one to four kilometers inside Lebanon, were designed to prevent vehicular traffic related to smuggling. The berms prevent villagers from Aarsal and Ras Baalbeck from harvesting their crops. To the east of Ras Baalbeck, the Syrians have also placed a manned border post. The GOL is taking a measured response, hoping that the governors of the Biqa' Valley and Damascus can arrange an understanding. The Lebanese military was staying out of it, according to Eid. Separately, political officers in the UN office in Beirut told us that New York is following the situation closely, but they have not received any instructions. End summary.

SYRIANS BUILDING EARTHEN  
BERMS ON LEBANESE SOIL

2. (C) On May 3, polchief and econoff met with Rola Nouredine, Special Assistant to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, to discuss the GOL's reaction to press reports that Syrian border guards had constructed earthen berms on Lebanese territory in the Biqa' Valley. Nouredine confirmed the press reports, adding that the events are more than a month old but the press just now picked up the story because a delegation of villagers came to Beirut to file a complaint. Nouredine then invited a Lebanese army general assigned to the Prime Minister's office, Gen. Said Eid, to brief us on the issue.

3. (C) According to Nouredine and Eid, Syrian border guards began building the berms on March 20 and finished in early April. The berms are located between one and four kilometers inside Lebanon. There is one set of berms to the east of the village of Aarsal, and another set to the east of the village of Ras Baalbeck. Eid showed us a video taken of the berms, which appeared to be five to six feet high and consisted entirely of dirt. Eid explained that the berms are designed to stop vehicle traffic, not human traffic. He said the Syrians told Lebanese authorities that the berms were

built to stop cross-border smuggling.

¶4. (C) Though built by Syrian border guards, the berms are not manned. Lebanese villagers from Aarsal and Ras Baalbeck can still walk to their fields and orchards that lie beyond the berms. The problem is that the berms block vehicular traffic, making harvesting impractical if not impossible. The villagers would have to hand carry or use mules to transport the produce back to their village.

¶5. (C) The situation near Ras Baalbeck is more complicated than the problems of the Aarsal villagers. The Syrians do not dispute that the land to east of Aarsal is Lebanese, according to Nouredine. However, the border to the east of Ras Baalbeck is not demarcated and Syria claims some of the land in Lebanon. In the Ras Baalbeck area, the Syrians constructed both a system of berms and established a pre-fabricated guard post. Eid said that about nine to ten Syrian border guards have been sighted around the guard post.

#### GOL TAKING A MEASURED APPROACH

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¶6. (C) Nouredine told us that the Prime Minister was committed to preventing the Syrians from effecting control over a piece of Lebanese territory. She said Siniora does not want "another Shebaa Farms." She explained that the Shebaa Farms issue originated because of a Syrian land grab in the 1950s. The Syrians had built border guard posts in the Shebaa Farms with the stated purpose of stopping smuggling. When the Israelis invaded the Golan Heights in 1967, they discovered the Syrian positions and, assuming the land around them was Syrian, occupied the Shebaa Farms area.

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¶7. (C) Overall, however, Nouredine and Eid did not appear particularly agitated by the dispute. Neither knew who was responsible for the issue in the GOL. Eid, a military officer, was all too happy to point out that since Syrian border guards, and not Syrian soldiers, had crossed into Lebanon, it was a problem for the Ministry of Interior. The Lebanese army is staying out of it, he said. Nouredine preferred the issue to be resolved at the local level. The governor of the Biqa' Valley is formally twinned with the Syrian governor of Damascus. She hoped they could work out a solution.

#### UN OFFICE AWAITING INSTRUCTIONS

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¶8. (C) Following the meeting with Nouredine, polchief and econoff met with Political Officers Imran Riza and Georges Nasr in the office of UNSYG Personal Representative to Lebanon Geir Pedersen. Riza said Pedersen would meet with Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat later that day. Riza and Nasr reported that New York is very interested in the earthen berm issue but so far has not issued any instructions to Pedersen's office. The UN is interested in any links this issue might have to the Larsen report, according to Riza. The local press also reported on May 3 that Pedersen had met that day with GOL Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamade, who described to Pedersen how this is another example of Syria not respecting Lebanon's borders.

#### COMMENT

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¶9. (C) The earthen berms near Aarsal and Ras Baalbeck represent just one of the many points of dispute along the Syrian-Lebanese border. In March, a prominent Lebanese geographer outlined 36 points of contention from north to south (reftel). According to our defense attache, the Lebanese military does not regard this issue as a new dispute. The Lebanese military has been told to not take any action, as the GOL intends to pursue the issue with political

negotiations. End comment.  
FELTMAN